

moon lay low above the woods in a dark blue velvet and unclouded sky.

In two or three days Christmas would be at hand, and, as usual at this season, Netta's mind and hands were busy together with seasonable thoughts and preparations concerned with the poor proteges and the great and Kingly festival that was coming so near.

Various hampers and parcels had already been deposited by her own or the servants' hands at the different poor cottages about the place. Yet, somehow, in spite of all her endeavors to the contrary, Netta felt far less cheery and 'Christmassy' this year than she had ever felt before. Though her heart was just as warm towards her poor neighbors as it had always been, she felt somehow a far less inclination to meet them and talk to them than she used to do.

No matter how she tried to shake it off, a weary feeling of sadness and depression still weighed on her young heart, changing her former cheery-bright, radiant looks and merry laughter into the veriest pale ghost of a smile.

The fact was, she began to dread meeting people; talking to them.

'How thin you are grown, Miss Netta, darlint!' one after another would say. 'And where are all the fine bright roses gone from your pretty cheeks? And isn't this wonderful news we hear of the wedding at Castle Grange?' So that often these days, instead of taking her Christmas parcels around to the recipients herself, she preferred to send them by one of the servants, for no other reason than this—to escape comments and questions on her own altered appearance and Godfrey Sutherland's wedding.

There was one person, however, whom she must not fail to go and see this year, or any other year that the dear old body might, happily, remain in the land of the living. For old Mrs. Dempsey, the dearest, sweetest old creature for many a mile around, was already well beyond the allotted span in years and could not be with them much longer. And, let Netta's Christmastide benefactions to her be ever so great, the girl knew well that unless they were accompanied or followed by a visit from herself all her dainty gifts and goodies were like to taste as so much ashes and dead sea fruit in old Mrs. Dempsey's mouth. And now it was already Christmas Eve, with the frosty moon shining coldly in the sky, and a great bank of dark grey clouds rising swiftly above the distant hills and rolling down from the west, with a promise of snow before nightfall.

'My dear child, surely you are not going out at this hour of the evening, and alone?' asked old Madame Dumont in dismay, as Netta suddenly stood before her, looking a picture of brightness and beauty in her becoming seal toque and furs, into which she had tucked a glowing bunch of holly berries and their leaves.

'Yes, dearie, I am—I have to,' said Netta gaily. 'I had almost forgotten poor dear old Mrs. Dempsey.'

'But, my dear, you sent her a most extravagant hamper of good things only yesterday,' protested Madame, reprovingly.

'Yes, I know. But she'd be quite disappointed if I did not go to see her myself as well. The poor old thing is so lonely—especially now that her only son and grandson are both gone to the war. And there's so little time now, as to-morrow is Christmas Day. But I shan't be long, as I'll take the short cut through the woods.'

'Through the woods!' Madame Dumont almost shrieked in horror. 'And at such a late hour—almost dark!'

'There'll be a moon presently—' Netta began.

'But, dear child, supposing you were to meet with some mishap—an evil tramp, or a wicked bull, or—or anything of that sort!' warned Madame, interrupting.

'Or some fierce kind of a rabbit, or a dangerous squirrel, or a man-eating white owl, that might swoop down and pick my eyes out,' laughed Netta. 'Why, you dear, silly, nervous old thing, you have been warning me against the dangers of those woods every time I went into them for primroses or daffodils since I was a child, and nothing has ever occurred to frighten me yet.'

'Oh, but, my dear,' said old Madame Dumont, shaking her head ominously as she peered over her spectacles at the girl, 'it's a long lane that has no turning. If you must go, do take one of the maids with you, I beg of you!'

'Mrs. Dempsey wouldn't find a word to say to me if I did,' laughed Netta, and ran off to save further discussion.

She knew the path through the woods of Castlederg so well that she did not feel in the least degree nervous or afraid. And after about a quarter of an hour's rapid walking she emerged safely from the long, dark, winding, and leaf-strewn path, and crossed the stile that led into a narrow breen, half-way down which nestled Mrs. Dempsey's neat little whitewashed and straw-thatched cabin, its windows shining bright.

Just as she did so she suddenly fell back with a little cry, for a large dog had suddenly bounded towards her, and with almost equal suddenness the figure of a man with a gun on his shoulder embodied itself out of the gathering darkness and mist.

He had almost passed her by before she knew who it was; but he, on his side, had been quicker to see and recognise her.

'Hello, Netta, is it you really? And I just happened to be thinking of you at this very minute! But where are you off to, all alone, at this hour of the evening, too?' spoke Godfrey Sutherland's well-remembered voice out of the darkness, in tones almost of rebuke.

'I'm going down to see Mrs. Dempsey,' she answered him coldly, after the first startled feeling of surprise had passed. She could not feel anything else but cold to him just yet—cold and proud, and bitterly hurt by his recent attitude and actions. Doubtless, he had just come home to spend Christmas with his bride, who, together with himself, would delight in flaunting their new-found happiness in her face. And he and she had been such friends—so much more than ordinary friends—but a little while ago! How could she feel anything else but sore and resentful, and how hard she would find it to hide it, however much she might try!

'Mayn't I come with you?' he asked, apparently undaunted by the chilliness of her tones: 'It is very late for you to be out alone.'

'Oh, I am quite used to it,' she replied, with a kind of mirthless, half-frozen little laugh. 'In fact, I should much prefer to be alone, if I may say so.'

'Oh—in that case,' he murmured, falling back and lifting his hat, evidently stung by her marked air of aloofness and hauteur, 'I must not think of intruding.' And in a moment he had vanished into the darkness.

Netta stumbled on a little blindly. Hardly had she advanced a dozen paces, however, when Godfrey's dog 'Bran' came bounding noisily after her.

'Away, Bran, away!' she commanded him irritably, as he trotted along by her side, shoving his cold, wet nose ingratiatingly now and again into her warmly-gloved hand.

But Bran absolutely refused to leave her. He was still close to her heels when she entered Mrs. Dempsey's cottage, and all that she or the old woman could say or do seemed powerless to alter his determination of remaining close by Netta's side.

'Well, maybe it's for luck, Miss Netta, avourneen,' the old woman said, after they had had their little chat, and the girl stood up at last to go. 'I often heard tell that it was a powerful lucky thing for a dog to follow a body like that. And to tell you nothing but the truth, Miss Netta, I'm glad you have his company for protection, for it's not safe for a young thing like you to be out on the dark, lonesome road. And if I were you, Miss Netta, honey, I'd not be going home through the woods to-night. The moon is gone behind the clouds, and it's grown terrible dark. And I heard tell there was a couple of very ill-looking tramps goin' round here within the last day or two. They say Mrs. Gregory's little house was broken into and robbed last night, and a boy of the Malones was stopped on the road too, and all his bits of money taken from him.'